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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest describes what primary sources are and how and why they can be used in elementary school classrooms. Primary sources are historical artifacts with which students can interact to effectively engage in active learning. Topics discussed in the Digest include: "What Are Primary Sources?"; "Why Use Primary Sources?"; "How To Use Primary Sources."; "Where To Find Primary Sources." Included is a list of references and ERIC resources related to the use of primary sources in the study of history. (RJC)

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Using Primary Sources in the Primary Grades

by Evelyn Holt Otten

What do a stamped Christmas postcard dated 1910, a Confederate one hundred dollar bill, soda pop bottles from Egypt, ice tongs, a rug beater, and a woven prayer rug from the Middle East with a picture of the Kaaba at Mecca all have in common? These and many other artifacts can become primary sources, the very real "stuff" of the social studies that can so effectively engage the young learner in active learning. The use of primary sources in the classroom is a way for students to develop the intellectual curiosity that leads to further research and increased awareness of the world around them.

What Are Primary Sources? The definition of "primary sources" varies. Danzer and Newman (1996, 22) examine this conceptual problem by discussing several definitions recognized by historians. They tend to agree with Henry Johnson's expansive concept that "primary sources include all the traces left by the human past — present ideals, present social customs and institutions, language, literature, material products of human industry, physical man himself, and the physical remains of men."

Johnson's broad definition of primary sources leads to great flexibility for classroom use, especially for beginning readers of the primary grades. The *History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools, Kindergarten through Grade Twelve* (1997, 147) explains that "documents make up most, but not all, of the primary source materials used by historians." Historians may use documents but teachers of early grades will frequently use realia or "ephemera" (Danzer & Newman 1996, 24) of the material culture.

Danzer and Newman (1991, 24) identify types of primary sources, including (1) print documents; (2) electronic media; (3) arts — graphic and fine; (4) folklore, folkways, and mythology; and (5) physical environment and material culture (built environment and artifacts). These five categories may aid teachers in identifying primary sources. Danzer and Newman, however, caution teachers to recognize that some primary sources may fit into more than one of the categories.

Why Use Primary Sources? "Primary sources are the ore from which history is made" (Danzer & Newman 1996, 22). Using primary sources is a way to link the human in the classroom with the humans involved in the creation of the sources. Often students fail to see the link between the remote past and the immediate present. Primary sources can create a bridge over that gap, a way of "tuning in" (Danzer & Newman 1996, 21) to the teaching of social studies.

Examination of primary sources is a performance expectation for the "Time, Continuity and Change" thematic strand of the NCSS *Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994, 22). The performance expectation for the early grades is that students should be able to "identify and use various sources for reconstructing the past, such as documents, letters, diaries, maps, textbooks, photos and others" (NCSS 1994, 2D, 34). *The National Standards for History for Grades K-4* also emphasizes student use of various kinds of primary sources in inquiries about topics in history (National Center for History in the Schools 1994, 15-26). By introducing primary sources in the classroom, students can question, explore, research, and draw links to the distant past in a fresh and creative way.

Barton and Levstik (1996) investigated the historical understanding of time among elementary children through the use of archival photographs. They found that "even the youngest children made some basic distinction in historical time" (Barton and Levstik 1996, 419). As the children matured, such distinctions of time became more sophisticated in concept. The students' ability to place the photographs in proper time sequence based on visual cues "indicates a significant body of understanding of historical chronology" (Barton and Levstik 1996, 419). The researchers recommend that study of history in the elementary grades "might productively focus on helping students refine and extend the knowledge they have gained about history" (Barton and Levstik 1996, 419).

How To Use Primary Sources. Using primary sources in the classroom is limited only by one's creativity and imagination. In the introductory sentence of this *Digest*, several examples of primary sources are listed, including soda bottles from another culture, Confederate money, ice tongs, a rug beater, a prayer rug, and Christmas postcards. The social studies thematic strands of "Time, Continuity and Change," "Culture," and "People, Places and Environments" (NCSS 1994) could be addressed using these items. So could most of the national history standards for students in the primary grades (National Center for History in the Schools 1994).

The stamped, dated Christmas postcards can be used to prompt inquiry on social customs and how they change over time, technological change, and the cost of postage using math as an extension activity.

The Confederate money addresses governmental structure, a different way of life, social customs and values, as well as a way to explore the institution of slavery in the United States.

Ice tongs and a rug beater can be used to stimulate investigations about social history, technological change, household chores, and modern conveniences.

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The Egyptian soda bottles and the Muslim prayer rug can be used in studies of cultural beliefs and practices, architecture and technology, assimilation, and religion.

Whole units of instruction can be built around a single artifact that allows students to "get involved" with the learning process and explore the questions that naturally arise from a curious mind. Such study easily accommodates an interdisciplinary approach, as students may study the technology of printing money and how the process has changed over time. Math can be incorporated into the study of how long ago something occurred and how much the money is worth. Language arts can be used to create a story about the origin of the Confederacy or the route the money may have traveled over time. These ideas can all lead to further research, leading to further questions. Teachers must be willing to allow students to find answers to their questions as primary sources "have the power to bring history to life, to engage students creatively and analytically" (Danzer and Newman 1996, 24).

Where To Find Primary Sources. Primary sources can be found everywhere. If that appears an oversimplification, one needs only to think about the expanded definition of primary sources. Attics, garages, basements, auctions, sales — ad infinitum — provide numerous opportunities to find primary sources. Travel is another way to acquire artifacts for classroom use. Local historical societies and places of historical significance are often willing to loan materials to teachers and may even provide an interpreter to explain and demonstrate how the artifact was used.

State historical bureaus, museums, and libraries often have replicas of primary sources in their collections. Diaries, letters, photographs, drawings, and other such items are often used to teach state and local history. State and national parks often offer similar materials. Ethnic, social, and cultural clubs may provide artifacts for classroom use or make speakers available to schools.

Much exists in the public domain which can be used for specific topics of research. The National Digital Library Program of the Library of Congress recently created "American Memory," an on-line collection of digitized versions of millions of items in its United States history collections available to the public on the Internet (www.loc.gov). The materials can be downloaded for classroom use.

The National Archives and Records Administration maintains the National Archives in Washington, D.C. as well as thirteen regional offices to provide access to its holdings. They can be contacted on the Internet (www.nara.gov) and by e-mail (inquiri@nara.gov).

World Wise Schools, maintained by the Peace Corps, provides a variety of resources for teachers. A newsletter, lesson plans created by former Peace Corps volunteers, a program of correspondence exchange with active Peace Corps volunteers, speakers, videos and teacher guides, and a web site are among their offerings. Contact World Wise Schools on the World Wide Web (www.peacecorps.gov) or by e-mail (dpinfo@peacecorps.gov).

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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